



GGNRA Chief Ranger Randy Lavasseur addresses the ranger cadets on day one.

GGNRA Ranger Cadet Program

On a foggy morning in April, seven local teenagers line up for formation in front of the flag on the Fort Baker Parade Ground in Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA). They have shown up ready to go in their uniforms, as assigned. They are all strangers and nobody is talking. A couple of the cadets are taking in the view of San Francisco Bay. Some are focused on the backpacks laying on the ground in front of them. The group is fidgeting quietly, visibly unsure of what waits. Each of the cadets has come to this point on their own, sponsored by staff from Marin County Probation Department. Over the past several weeks they each completed registration paperwork, wrote an application essay, and successfully completed a panel interview with GGNRA Visitor and Resource Protection Staff. They have gotten to this point through recognized individual effort.

U.S. Park Ranger James Cox is on the parade ground to welcome them. He congratulates the group on their effort to this point, but lets the cadets know that their process of being an individual is finished. Now, Ranger Cox explains, they are part of a team. A moment later the cadets' attention is drawn to several patrol cars approaching and the group again goes silent. The students watch as a group of law enforcement rangers file in before them and stand together at attention. In unison the rangers salute the flag. The silence is broken when Ranger Cox announces, "Welcome to the Ranger Cadet Program."

Over the next five days, the cadets learn what it means to be a United States Park Ranger. They are introduced to some of the tools of the trade during a boat patrol on the bay and by assisting at a helicopter landing zone later in the week. The cadets are taught an array of new skills including GPS navigation, radio communication, search and rescue techniques, and technical rope work. They learn and then demonstrate proficiency in basic first aid and cardiopulmonary resuscitation. As the week progresses, so do the challenges. The basic knots learned on day one are put to use on day three when they tie into a rope system for a rappel. Search techniques and litter carry out skills are required on day five during a final mock rescue scenario to transport an injured hiker 2.5 miles to a trailhead.



Ranger cadets learn how a rappel system works.

Along the way, the cadets learn about a unit within the National Park Service (NPS) in their own back yard. In their interviews, most of the cadets admitted that they knew little to nothing about the NPS. Before the week is out, they attend presentations from an NPS lifeguard, a trail crew supervisor, a buildings and grounds supervisor, and a fire crew lead. A cultural resources specialist gives them a tour of a one of the historic battery structures in GGNRA. A park partner, the Marine Mammal Center, talks to them about their efforts to help protect species that live along the coast. All week long they get a chance to see how law enforcement works with each of these groups to protect the resources within GGNRA.



Ranger cadets practicing a wheeled litter carry out.

This interaction with law enforcement is a key focus of the program. All of the cadets are involved in programs with Marin County Probation Department and many share that they have had negative encounters with law enforcement in the past. Some are described as at-risk, most are actively on probation. The curriculum is designed to put the youth and the officers in positions demanding mutual trust and honesty to accomplish goals. While the students are working hard to learn and demonstrate their abilities, ranger staff are working hard to provide a positive example of law enforcement, show the personalities behind the badge, and to push the cadets to expand their view of what is possible.

The Ranger Cadet Program, now in its second generation, was started in 2004 at Lake Mead National Recreation Area by former Lake Mead Deputy Chief Ranger Randy Lavasseur. Initially the program involved a simple, one-day tour of the Hoover Dam. Over the years, the program grew to the current week-long format. Now as Chief Ranger of GGNRA, Lavasseur tasked Ranger Cox with coordinating and leading a GGNRA pilot

program building on the foundation from Lake Mead. Ranger Cox coordinated the schedule, cadet selection and logistical operations that brought those seven cadets to the Fort Baker Parade Ground on day one. Support for the program included contributions from the Golden Gate National Park Conservancy, Cavallo Lodge, and Galls of San Francisco.

At the end of the week, success is measured by the attitude and effort seen from the cadets. They leave with a new found confidence in themselves and what they can accomplish. "I have pretty low confidence when it comes to many things," admitted 15 year old ranger cadet Elena Margarito, "but it feels great because I achieved this."

On a sunny afternoon in April, seven cadets are grouped together outside a classroom at Rodeo Beach in GGNRA for the program's closing ceremony. Waiting inside are parents, family members, probation officers, and law enforcement rangers. The cadets are nervous again, but this time they are talking with their team about a plan. They have decided how they will enter the room and who will lead the group. Attendees watch as seven ranger cadets file in before them and stand together at attention. In unison the cadets take their seats. This time the silence is broken by applause. Several of the cadets, despite best efforts, are unable to conceal a proud smile.



Rangers and Cadets pose for a group photo following their completion ceremony.